



AUDIO FAQ

Q What exactly is an ID3 tag and how do I use it?

A An ID3 tag is extra data in an MP3 file that records the track's title, artist, album, track number, genre and other information. In Windows Explorer, right-click an MP3 file, click on the Summary tab and then the Advanced View to see the ID3 tag. You can modify and change the data if it's incorrect and add any missing information. If you ripped the song using iTunes or Windows Media Player, this data should have been filled in automatically.

A complete ID3 tag is used to sort your music collection. Good MP3 players will let you find a song by artist, album or genre, bypassing the need to remember the exact filename and its location. Cheaper MP3 players won't sort the information in this way and are much more confusing to use, as you can choose a song only by its filename. Windows Media Player and iTunes also use this information to sort and display your songs.



▲ You can edit song information using Windows Explorer

REVIEW MP3 PLAYER

SONY NW-E205

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £80 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.advancedmp3players.co.uk

DETAILS www.sony.co.uk

It's not often that we come across expensive electronic products that are designed to look like vegetables. For whatever reason, though, Sony's NW-E205 looks like a large plastic bean.

There's nothing inherently wrong with a bean-shaped MP3 player, of course, and in fact this design has some advantages. There's enough room inside the bean-shaped case to hold a proper USB plug. Push aside the cover at one end and it pops out, ready to plug directly into your computer.

The rest of the case has, it appears, been filled with the rechargeable battery. The NW-E205 charges from a computer through the USB plug and then seems to play forever. It ran continuously for 50 hours, which is unheard of for an MP3 player and is closer in operation to Sony's MiniDisc players.

Unfortunately, the player is fiddly to use. Its controls consist of three buttons and one four-way rocking switch, and accessing the menus is trickier than we'd like. More annoying, though, is the hold switch. This locks the other controls so that the player doesn't switch itself off or skip songs while it's in your pocket. Unfortunately, hold is activated and deactivated by sliding the USB port cover, and it's a real pain to use.

Transferring music on to the player is just as annoying. Sony's new MP3 players can play MP3 music files, but you can't simply drag music on to the player in Windows. Windows Media Player 10 recognises the player and will automatically synchronise your music files, but the player refused to play any music copied in this way. Instead you



are forced to use Sony's SonicStage software, which is unnecessarily complicated. If you want to fill the player just once, its bearable, but if you want to add and remove tracks continually we recommend that you avoid this player.

The NW-E205 doesn't support DRM-protected WMA music files, so it's no good if you're planning to boost your music collection with downloads from the internet. We think it's about time Sony started to support online music stores.

Once you've loaded it with music and got the hang of the controls, the NW-E205 sounds good. The supplied headphones are acceptable, but they don't produce much bass. The sound quality from the player itself is better, so it's worth adding a high-quality pair of Sony or Sennheiser headphones if you can.

The NW-E205 will suit some people but annoy others. Its cute design and huge battery are great and the built-in USB plug is handy, but using SonicStage is a pain. It's OK, but not great.

Tom Royal

✓ Unusual design; great battery life

✗ SonicStage software is annoying; fiddly controls

SPECIFICATIONS 512MB flash memory, supports MP3, Atrac3, Atrac3+. **Part code** NW-E205

HOTLIST 2.1 SPEAKERS

TRUST 2.1 Speaker Set SP-3600A

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £32 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.microdirect.co.uk

DETAILS www.trust.com

These classy speakers have a remote that includes a volume control, line input and headphone socket. Sound quality was extremely good in our tests, with solid bass and detailed mid and high frequencies. The speakers aren't massively loud, and the satellite cables are only 1.5 metres long, but they're great value.



SPECIFICATIONS 2.1 speakers, line and aux inputs, 28W RMS power. **Part code** 14235

HOTLIST SOUND CARD

CREATIVE Sound Blaster X-Fi XtremeMusic

RATING ★★★★★

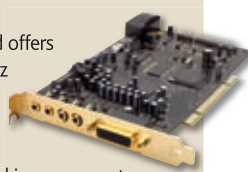
PRICE £99 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.misco.co.uk

DETAILS <http://uk.europe.creative.com>

Creative's new sound card offers high-quality 24-bit, 96KHz sound recording and playback, although you'll need a good set of speakers to hear the sound improvement. The X-Fi is good for recording music, and also has EAX Advanced HD 5.0 sound processing, which makes games that support it more atmospheric.

If you want the best sound on your PC, the X-Fi is better than any onboard sound chip.



SPECIFICATIONS Line, mic and optical S/PDIF inputs, four line (7.1) outputs, midi port, PCI interface. **Part code** 70SB046002010

HOTLIST SURROUND SPEAKER SET

LOGITECH Z-5500

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £205 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.dabs.com

DETAILS www.logitech.co.uk

Logitech's 5.1 Z-5500 speakers have what it takes to satisfy most people's surround-sound needs. They're powerful enough to shake the house with 505W RMS, and they deliver rich bass thanks to the large subwoofer.

The speakers are THX-certified and come with a DTS and Dolby Digital decoder, so you can plug in a DVD player as well as a PC.



SPECIFICATIONS 5.1 surround sound, 505W RMS, optical and coaxial digital inputs, three stereo inputs, Dolby Digital and DTS decoder. **Part code** 970115-0120

REVIEW 1.8" HARD DISK MP3 PLAYER**COWON
iAUDIO X5**

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £239 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.pciho.comDETAILS www.iaudio.com

Apple's iPod may have overwhelming dominance in the MP3 player market, but there are still plenty of alternatives. Although it's not as sleek as a black iPod nano, the X5 is quite attractive with its understated black metal. The only blemish is a slight bulge around the colour screen.

The X5 sounds as good as it looks. Music is clear, loud and punchy, although there is a little too much treble. The supplied earphones can be a bit uncomfortable but produce surprisingly good sound, even if the bass is somewhat lacking. Cowon has included all sorts of sound enhancements, but you're better off leaving them alone and tweaking the equaliser instead.

Audiophiles will be pleased by the X5's support for Ogg Vorbis and FLAC files. Music tracks encoded in FLAC are often quite large and will eat away at the X5's respectable 20GB of hard disk space more quickly than music encoded in MP3 or WMA formats. The X5 doesn't currently support DRM-protected WMA music from services such as Napster, but a beta firmware upgrade that enables this should soon be available.

The X5's major flaw is its interface. The menu system is confusing and nowhere near as foolproof as the iPod's simple hierarchical interface. Even more frustrating is the inability to browse your music by ID3 tags. This makes it almost impossible to look through your music library by song title, artist, album, genre and so on. Instead, music is listed by filename and grouped together in folders in a file directory-like view, so you have to organise



your music manually. The inexplicably tiny joystick on the front of the X5 can also be fiddly for those with larger fingers.

The X5 also stores and displays photos, which it can download from digital cameras using the included dongle and a USB cable. Unfortunately, the 160x128-pixel screen is too blocky for serious use. The X5 even plays video encoded in MPEG4 and XviD format, but the 15fps limit makes video look jerky, and the low-resolution screen doesn't help either.

The included dongle is where the line in, line out, USB and charging connectors are found. This adds unwanted bulk if you are travelling with the X5, as it's the only way of charging the player.

The iAUDIO X5 has great sound quality and support for audio formats, but it's very difficult to use and Cowon must address this if it's to compete successfully.

Alan Lu

✓ Great sound quality; wide support for audio formats

✗ Poor navigation and confusing interface; low-resolution screen

SPECIFICATIONS 20GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface, supports MP3, WMA, OGG Vorbis and FLAC music files, 15fps video playback, supports JPEG images, 160x128 colour screen. **Part code** X5 20GB

HOTLIST HARD DISK MP3 PLAYER**APPLE
iPod mini 6GB**

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £161 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.ukDETAILS www.apple.com/uk

Apple has endowed new iPod minis with a longer battery life: this 6GB model lasted more than 24 hours in our tests. There's no custom EQ, it won't play WMAs and you'll need to stick to iTunes for downloading music, but if that doesn't bother you, this is the best compact player.

SPECIFICATIONS 6GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface, MP3, AAC, WAV, AIFF and Audible playback. **Part code** M9803B/A

**HOTLIST HARD DISK MP3 PLAYER****SONY
NW-HD5 20GB**

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £168 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.ukDETAILS www.sony.co.uk

The NW-HD5 looks and sounds superb, and is more compact than most MP3 players with a 1.8" disk. It doesn't play WMA files, though, so it can't be used with stores such as Napster. The player's removable battery lasted 30 hours in our test. It's great value if you don't buy music online.

SPECIFICATIONS 20GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface, MP3, ATRAC3, ATRAC3plus. **Part code** NWH5R

**CHOOSING AN...****MP3
PLAYER**

Pick up the beat with our guide to buying an MP3 player

1 Below is a typical specification for an MP3 player costing £40. Using flash memory means it can be very small and light, but its 128MB capacity will provide room for just a couple of albums of MP3s encoded at 128Kbit/s. It's worth buying a player with 256MB or more to provide greater listening choice while on the move. Cheap players often cut corners when it comes to sound quality, so approach these with caution.



2 If you don't mind something bulkier, consider devices that use alternative storage technology. CD-based MP3 players read MP3s burned on a CD-R, but are no longer worth the money. Hard disk-based players have up to 60GB capacity, so they can hold hundreds of albums; prices start at £160. Players based on tiny 1" hard disks of between 1.5GB and 6GB capacity cost from £109, and give an excellent balance of portability and capacity.

3 With the exception of CD-based players, which read pre-recorded discs, most players need a PC interface to upload MP3 files. USB is the most common, but USB Hi-Speed or FireWire give speedier transfers.

4 Battery life varies between two and 50 hours. Hard disk players are the most power-hungry and benefit from a lithium-ion battery, which is light and easy to recharge.

5 Many players play WMA files, Microsoft's rival format to MP3. Hard disk players may also play WAV files for full CD-quality audio.

FILL IN YOUR SPECS HERE

(Recommended minimum in grey)

CAPACITY: 128MB
TECHNOLOGY: Flash memory
INTERFACE: USB
BATTERY: Disposable
SUPPORTED FORMATS: MP3
EXTRA FEATURES: